

The Value of Discomfort

Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2007 May 26, 2007, Mead Memorial Chapel

Good afternoon. On behalf of the faculty and staff of the College, I extend a warm welcome to the parents and families of our graduating seniors, and of course to members of the class of 2007, as well.

Both this baccalaureate service and commencement are joyous occasions celebrating an important transition in the lives of our graduates. Today's service is an occasion to reflect on what our graduating seniors have already done, on the experience and the accomplishments of the past four years, and what those years have meant to them and to this College community.

Let me begin, therefore, by telling you a few things about the Middlebury Class of 2007. There are 643 graduates in this class, 287 men and 356 women. Some 365 of you are graduating with honors, and 65 were elected to Phi Beta Kappa. The most popular majors for your class were economics, chosen by 92 students, and English, chosen by 74, and 135 of you majored in two subjects. About 77 percent of you—497 students—studied at least one foreign language, and 62 percent—405 students—studied abroad for at least one semester in 48 countries. Members of your class have earned three Watson Fellowships for research abroad, two Fulbright Scholarships, and a Keasbey Scholarship to study at Oxford University.

Your class has been characterized by an exceptional spirit of volunteerism. Collectively, approximately 70 percent of you contributed to the community through volunteer and service-learning projects, as well through *pro bono* consulting work. Some of you have served on local fire departments and rescue squads; traveled to New Orleans in the wake of hurricane Katrina to assist in the rebuilding effort; served as Big Brothers or Big Sisters to local children; worked with the John Graham Community Shelter, providing meals and companionship to the homeless; and shared your expertise with local businesses and regional economic development groups based on what you learned in economics and geography courses.

Members of your class started the Middlebury chapter of Relay for Life, and many of you have participated in that event, raising more than \$669,000 over the past four years to support research by the American Cancer Society. You also initiated Dialogues for Peace, a student group, dedicated to seeking nonviolent solutions to conflicts around the world.

The Sunday Night Group, which you helped to launch, has been incredibly influential in promoting concrete action to address one of the most serious concerns facing your generation: climate change. Not only have you initiated or assisted with many efforts to promote sustainability and energy efficiency on campus, but you helped to organize and lead last month's Step It Up campaign, with thousands of simultaneous rallies across the country. This was by far the largest environmental demonstration in the United States since the first Earth Day 37 years ago.

Largely because of your energy, leadership, and dedication, Middlebury has been recognized by the Carnegie Foundation for its "community engagement" and by the Princeton Review, which named Middlebury as one of its "colleges with a conscience" for fostering social responsibility and public service. I am enormously proud of all that you have done to bring positive changes to our community, our country, and our world.

I am also truly impressed by the imagination and scholarship of this class. These qualities were vividly demonstrated last month at our first College-wide symposium recognizing student research and creativity. About 60 members of your class participated in that symposium, where students presented the results of research on subjects ranging from solar power to social entrepreneurship to religious life at Middlebury. This symposium, which is going to be an annual event, exemplifies the spirit of intellectual risk-taking, independent thought, and a passion for learning that should characterize the best of a liberal arts education.

This College is truly exceptional in the opportunities it provides for students to do original research and creative projects, often in partnership with a faculty mentor. One member of your class received one of three awards from the National Association of Student Anthropologists this year for her study of the effects of Fair Trade on organic rice farmers in Thailand. Another received the top prize in a national undergraduate chemistry competition conducted by the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. A third was the only undergraduate student chosen to lead a session at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers last month. And two of you were part of a Middlebury team that finished first among 37 teams in a national computer programming contest.

You've had impressive success in the arts, as well. For example, a number of members of this class belonged to the cast and crew that staged last year's remarkable production of *The Bewitched*, which was presented at the Kennedy Center in Washington as one of four finalists in the American College Theatre Festival. In addition, a member of your class relied on her work in the arts to become one of the winners of the Kathryn Wasserman Davis 100 Projects for Peace national fellowship program. She will use the study of architecture to analyze the border crossings between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, exploring how such crossings may be reconceived as points of connection rather than of division.

In athletics, too, you have excelled. Your class includes 30 athletes who have earned All American honors in intercollegiate sports and 50 who earned all-NESCAC academic honors. You helped to win 25 NESCAC championships and eight national titles for Middlebury over the past four years in intercollegiate sports, and this spring our rugby club won its first national championship.

There is yet one more notable thing about this class that I would like to mention. You have helped to make Middlebury a more diverse and inclusive place than it was four years ago—which brings me to the theme I particularly want to discuss this afternoon. Your class is

statistically the most diverse, and the most international, ever to graduate from Middlebury. That has certainly affected—and I would say it has greatly improved—the education you have received here.

Why? In a nutshell: since so much of what you learn in college you learn from your fellow students, the broader the range of backgrounds and perspectives those students represent, the broader and richer the education one is likely to receive. Because of the residential and human-intensive nature of your Middlebury education, little of what you do that is related to your studies is done in solitude. You are always bouncing ideas off of classmates, roommates, hall-mates, housemates, teammates, or fellow members of student organizations.

The human-intensive nature of learning at liberal arts colleges, long a hallmark and strength at Middlebury, was energized by the Civil Rights and other social movements of the 1960s. Formerly underrepresented groups began attending American colleges and universities in significantly greater numbers, and the breadth of learning experiences changed radically.

The changes, at first, were by dint of the kinds of discussions that were taking place on a meaningful scale in the classroom. Those discussions, whether about a classical work of literature or an interpretation of some historical event, included new perspectives that had previously been absent from the classroom, and no doubt forced some people to rethink their opinions.

Over time, the fruits of a broadened scope of discussion extended to the curriculum and the faculty with similar results: a bigger tent of ideas within which to teach and learn. But that bigger tent brought intellectual conflict and discomfort. The so-called “culture wars” were an expression of the tension created by the challenge and inclusion of new interpretations of the curriculum. Some degree of conflict was inevitable given the new and vastly different perspectives that had been previously excluded from, or were, at best, on the margins of the academy. Through these changes, the academy became a richer, but also a more polarized, environment for learning.

Since the 1960s, small, rural liberal arts colleges have not experienced as rapid and extensive a change in the composition of their student bodies as public institutions or schools located in urban areas. Yet, many have changed quite significantly, especially with the arrival, more recently, of international students, many of whom come from the developing world.

I cite, for example, the changes that have taken place here at Middlebury since 1980. In 1980, less than 5 percent of the student population was either an American student of color or an international student ... that is less than 1 in 20 students. Our incoming class, the Class of 2011, will be approximately 32 percent American students of color and international. Twenty-seven years ago it was 1 in 20; today, it is 1 in 3. In addition, the change in the percentage of students on need-based financial aid is noteworthy because a student body with greater socioeconomic diversity is essential to our students' exposure to a variety of perspectives. In 1980, the percentage was 24 percent, while for the incoming class this September, the percentage is 47 percent: the highest ever.

This change in the composition of the student body reflects, in part, the changing demographics of the United States. But more than that, it reflects the College's deliberate effort to provide the richest learning environment for Middlebury students. The College's recently approved strategic plan has as its highest priority increasing access to Middlebury for the very strongest students by continuing to meet the full need of all admitted students, increasing the grant portion of our financial aid packages, and reducing the amount of debt a student will incur during four years at the College.

The strategic planning committee believed that, by removing some of the financial barriers to studying at Middlebury, the College would more easily matriculate students from rural areas, from developing countries, and from inner cities. The student body, as a result, would be more ethnically, racially, and socio-economically diverse. There would no doubt be a greater diversity of ideas coming from students with such varied backgrounds, which would once again energize the classroom with frequent exchanges rooted in our students' vastly different life experiences.

It is no longer a cliché to say that “the local is the global and the global the local.” In fact, it should go without saying that all of you who are graduating tomorrow will no longer be competing with young men and women predominantly from your hometowns, from a particular region of this country, or even from the United States. In all likelihood, the majority of you will be trying to get a job, pursue a project, or secure a spot in a leading graduate or professional school that will bring you in direct competition with young people from ... you name it: Shanghai, Tokyo, Madrid, Buenos Aires, Johannesburg, Delhi, or Berlin. Even those of you determined to do something independently, outside of official structures or institutions, will soon learn that you are now part of a global network, and the sooner you adapt to what this means, the easier you will discover how to succeed within that network.

In other words, it is no longer adequate to understand only one's own culture, no matter how dominant that culture may seem; or one's political and economic system, no matter how much others claim to want to copy it; or a single approach to solving problems, no matter how sure you are that your approach is the best. To succeed in the 21st century—which means to be engaged in the world in a way that allows you to make a difference, to fulfill a sense of achievement, and to allow you to be true to yourself because you know who you are — you need to be multi-cultural, multi-national, and multi-operational in how you think. And you can only be multi-cultural, multi-national, and multi-operational if you feel comfortable with the notion of difference. And that is why we seek diversity here at Middlebury.

But greater diversity means change, and change on college campuses is almost always difficult. Few 18 to 22 year olds are skilled in inviting or tolerating perspectives that are vastly different from their own. Frankly, the same goes for 30-, 40-, and 50-something-year-old academics. Even though a campus may become more diverse in terms of the numbers of underrepresented groups present, the level of engagement can still be inconsequential if those representing different viewpoints are not encouraged and supported to express them. If an institution is not prepared to make space, figuratively speaking, for previously excluded groups, and support their presence on campus, its diversity efforts cannot succeed. And if the wariness about discomfort is stronger than the desire to hear different viewpoints because engaging difference is uncomfortable, then the quest for diversity is hollow no matter what the demographic statistics on a campus reflect.

In order for the pursuit of diversity to be intellectually defensible and valuable to those seeking a first-rate education at places like Middlebury, it needs to result in deliberation. It cannot simply facilitate the exchange of one orthodoxy or point of view for another. The best liberal arts education requires all voices, those of the old order as much as those of the new, and even those in between, to be

subjected to the critical analysis that is supposed to make the academy a distinctive institution in society.

I know first hand of several incidents during your four years at the College that speak directly to the challenges of ensuring that a diverse spectrum of opinions can be voiced and considered within our academic community. To name just a few: the protest against the College's policy allowing military recruitment on campus; the complaints about the College's judicial procedures that were triggered by the suspension of an African-American student; the reaction to the College's decision to accept an endowed professorship in honor of a conservative former chief justice of the United States Supreme Court; and most recently, the rash of hateful homophobic graffiti and the resulting discussions about offensive stereotyping and free speech on a college campus.

Several of these issues were discussed at faculty meetings or in several large forums on campus. Though the depth of engagement at these gatherings may not have reached the level that many who were passionate about the issues would have liked, students and faculty did express themselves in ways that didn't happen on this campus 20, 15, or even 10 years ago. Issues were brought up by students and faculty that raised the collective consciousness of those in attendance, and, in some cases, had an impact on College policies and procedures.

The reaction to one gathering, in particular, was as instructive as the issues about which we learned at the open forum. Following a meeting in McCullough social space that was called to address several racial incidents on campus, I received a number of e-mails from students in which they apologized on behalf of their fellow students, whom the e-mail writers believed were disrespectful in how they engaged me. I found the e-mails — and there were a good number of them — surprising, because I found the meeting, which was attended by 300 students, more civil than I expected it to be, and in no case do I recall any student expressing their concerns in ways that I would consider disrespectful. Was it uncomfortable? Yes, for sure. Were the students disrespectful? I don't think so. But being uncomfortable, as many of us were made to feel that day, is a good thing; it needs to be part of one's education.

Similarly, this year's open discussions about homophobic graffiti and other anti-gay and lesbian acts on campus did not delve as deeply into the root causes of such unacceptable stereotyping and the vicious treatment of individuals as one might expect given the incidents in question. Yet, the reactions to what was said at the open meetings created discomfort among those who were accused of contributing to homophobia on campus. The accusation—stereotyping recruited athletes as homophobic—highlights, once again, the challenges that greater diversity and openness bring to an academic community. Was the stereotyping of a single group a productive way to engage this important topic?

What emerged from our discussions of the homophobic incidents, at least thus far, is hardly what one might call neat and tidy. There was, however, much learned beginning with a far greater awareness of the bigotry that exists here as it does in society at-large, and that we have considerable work to do if we truly aspire to be a community that welcomes diversity and wishes to learn from it. We also witnessed how easy it can be for some members of an aggrieved group to fall into the same kind of stereotyping from which they themselves have suffered. Diversity sure can be messy.

The controversy surrounding the acceptance by the College of an endowed professorship in American history and culture in honor of William Rehnquist is one more example of the complexities that come with an increasingly diverse community.

Because the former chief justice was conservative, and was on the side of several court decisions that ran counter to the positions held by several underrepresented groups on campus, there was a genuine feeling on the part of some that honoring Mr. Rehnquist was a repudiation of their presence on campus and a sign that the College did not value diversity. They felt, in their words, "invisible and disrespected" as a result of the College accepting the professorship. Though one can understand this perspective, especially given the history of underrepresented groups here and on other campuses, it is unfortunate that the Chief Justice's accomplishments and reputation as a brilliant jurist by liberal and conservative constitutional scholars alike were lost in the opposition to his politics.

Ironically, the stance taken by those who believed it was wrong to honor the Chief Justice because of his position on particular court cases undermines the very thing the protestors support most passionately—diversity. Some couched their protests in the name of the goals of liberal education, arguing that the ultimate goal should be about "advancing" social change. I do not share in that narrow definition of liberal education, especially liberal education in and for the 21st century. Rather, liberal education must be first and foremost about ensuring a broad range of views and opinions in the classroom and across campus so that our students can question routinely both their preconceived and newly developed positions on important matters. Such deliberation will serve as the best foundation for enabling our graduates to contribute to the betterment of society.

In writing on the College's alumni online listserv about the Rehnquist controversy and the reported opposition of some to President Clinton speaking at tomorrow's Commencement ceremony, an alumnus from the Class of 2001 offered this perspective:

"I always thought that the benefit of a place like Middlebury was that it opened your mind and helped you become more informed by allowing (or, forcing) you to interact with, listen to, and learn from people [with] different opinions — even if that meant welcoming those you disagree with onto your own turf."

I hope those of you in the audience who are graduating tomorrow have given, and will continue to give, this topic some thought. For sure, diversity is intellectually and socially challenging; it forces you to engage issues more broadly than you might otherwise. It often creates unintended consequences; and it surely can make one uncomfortable. But some discomfort, amidst all that is comfortable about Middlebury, is the best preparation for a successful entry into our increasingly complex global world.

We have today few if any institutions that can claim a monopoly on how best to make the world a better, more tolerant, and just place. Talented, thoughtful, and well-educated individuals like yourselves, who have been made to feel uncomfortable and understand difference, are more likely than others to figure out how to discern right from wrong, acceptable from unacceptable behavior, and know the difference between ethical and unethical conduct.

As you leave Middlebury, the most important kind of confidence you must feel is the confidence that your education has prepared you to make sound judgments and to act on them. I believe because you have been exposed to diverse ideas, opinions, and people over the

course of the past four years, and have been made to feel uncomfortable at times, you will discover that confidence and draw upon it so that it will serve you well in exercising your judgment and claiming your place in the wider world.

Congratulations, Class of 2007. We wish you the best.

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